

THE GAY HISTORY SERIES – Lesson #4

Governor In Drag

Lord Cornbury, Royal Governor of the Colony of New York (1701)

One of the oddest things about the British is the fact that they seem to find something hysterically funny about men dressing up in women's clothes. As you will see, this has been going on for a while.

Edward Hyde, 3rd Earl of Clarendon (November 28, 1661-March 31, 1723), styled Viscount Cornbury between 1674 and 1709, was Royal Governor of New York and New Jersey between 1701 and 1708, and is perhaps best known for the claims of his cross-dressing while in office. Born the Hon. Edward Hyde, the only child of Henry, Viscount Cornbury (1638-1709), eldest son of the 1st Earl of Clarendon, and the former Theodosia Capell (1640-62), he was the nephew of Lady Anne Hyde, Duchess of York, wife of the future King James II. From the age of nine, since his father had just remarried to the heiress Flower Backhouse, he lived at Swallowfield in Berkshire and he matriculated at Oxford on January 23, 1675, a month after his father had succeeded as 2nd Earl of Clarendon, making him Viscount Cornbury.

He entered the Royal Regiment of Dragoons, and became a Tory Member of Parliament for Wiltshire from 1685-96 and for Christchurch 1695-1701. He was Master of the Horse to Prince George of Denmark, and a Page of Honour to King James II at his Coronation. He was one of the first commanders to desert the King in 1688, taking with him as many troops as he could. Also in 1688, Lord Cornbury married, in a clandestine ceremony, Katherine O'Brien, daughter of Henry, Lord Ibrackan, eldest son of the 7th Earl of Thomond, who succeeded her mother in 1702 as 8th Baroness Clifton. Lady Cornbury died in New York on August 11, 1706 (in the middle of the scandal) and is buried at Trinity Church, New York.

As Governor of New York and New Jersey "in which position he earned a very foul repute. It is said that his character and conduct were equally abhorred in both hemispheres," as *Wikipedia* states. He was viewed by his contemporaries as "a moral profligate, sunk in corruption: possibly the worst governor Britain ever imposed on an American colony."

He took bribes and plundered the public treasury. Nineteenth Century historian George Bancroft said that Cornbury illustrated the worst form of the English aristocracy's "arrogance, joined to intellectual imbecility". Later historians characterize him as a "degenerate and pervert who is said to have spent half of his time dressed in women's clothes", a "fop and a wastrel".

He seems too to have been more than a little nuts. He is said to have delivered a "flowery panegyric on his wife's ears" after which he invited every gentleman present to feel precisely how shell-like they were. He misappropriated £1,500 - an immense amount of money in those days - meant for the defence of New York Harbor. He also dressed in women's clothing and lurked behind trees to pounce, shrieking with laughter, on his victims. (This is the Governor, now).

The high point, or low point, of his political career came when Cornbury opened the 1702 New York Assembly, his first as Governor, clad in a hooped gown and an elaborate headdress and carrying a fan, imitative of the style of Queen Anne. When his choice of clothing was questioned by the stunned legislators, he replied, "You are all very stupid people not to see the propriety of it all. In this place and occasion, I represent a woman (the Queen), and in all respects I ought to represent her as faithfully as I can". I know, this is starting to sound like something out of Monty Python. Well, now we may know how Monty Python got started.

It is also said that in August 1706, when his wife Lady Cornbury died, His High Mightiness (as he preferred to be called) attended the funeral again dressed as a woman. With typical British understatement it is written that "Shortly after this, mounting complaints from colonists prompted the Queen to remove Cornbury from office".

Try a flood of protest and outrage that weighed down every vessel headed for London, as well as the refusal of eventually every substantial official or businessman in New York to work with or obey this lunatic, culminating in outright rebellion. If London hadn't wised up and relieved Cornbury of his post on the urgent petition of just about every reputable and responsible man in the colony, the American Revolution might have begun 70 years earlier than it did, they were that fed up. By the time his replacement finally arrived in 1708, Cornbury was in jail, arrested for debt, a subject of contempt and bitter mockery, and to a number of local legal and legislative inquiries trying to figure out where thousands of pounds missing from the treasury had gone. We tend to lose sight of the fact that our

ancestors were a lot more serious about things than we are, and they just plain did not put up with the crap that we do.

The British Government of Queen Anne, hauled Cornbury back to London under arrest and placed him on trial for corruption. They seized his estates in payment for monies he had allegedly embezzled from the taxpayers of New York, although how much of those funds ever found their way back across the Atlantic is open to question.

Although he became Lord Clarendon on his father's death, Cornbury died at Chelsea , in obscurity and debt, still without his estates and income restored, and was buried on April 5, 1723 in Westminster Abbey.